SNAKE RIVER ALLIANCE

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DOE: DO IT RIGHT

There is wide agreement that activities at the Idaho National Engineering and Environmental Laboratory have damaged Idaho's environment. There is even substantial agreement that waste that's in the ground poses the greatest threat, since it sits (and spreads) above the Snake River Aquifer. But the commitment to cleaning up that contamination is shaky, clearly buffeted by forces that have little to do with protecting Idaho's land, water, and people. The mixed waste plant proposed for construction at INEEL may prove to be a case in point.

What's at Risk?

Transuranic waste presents some of the most serious threats in the Department of Energy complex. That's because TRU waste is contaminated with plutonium, which remains radioactive for nearly a quarter of a million years. Until 1970, the DOE habitually buried its plutonium-contaminated waste, and INEEL was Dumping Ground #1. Idaho ended up with 57,000 cubic meters of buried TRU waste. According to the most recent study, there is as much plutonium buried in Idaho as there is throughout the rest of the nuclear weapons complex. That's ten times more than we were previously told.

Always we were assured that plutonium would move through the ground very slowly if at all. That assurance was always hard to swallow, and recent tests prove it false. Soil and groundwater samples taken at INEEL in 1997 show that plutonium has moved rapidly both laterally and vertically. Americium, a plutonium decay product, was found in the Snake River Aquifer itself, hundreds of feet below the burial grounds.

Idaho's problem is compounded by the hazardous chemicals and heavy metals almost always mixed with the plutonium and by the ever-increasing amount of soil and groundwater this mixed waste pollutes.

The DOE's First Response

With the exception of Pit 9, which has so far come to nothing, the DOE has made no attempt to reduce the peril of buried plutonium. Instead, it has focused two decades' worth of effort to open the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant in New Mexico. If WIPP ever opens, it will only take plutonium waste that has been stored above ground since 1970. At INEEL, that's 65,000 cubic meters that do not immediately threaten the Snake River Aquifer. In other words, "getting waste to WIPP," the politicians' nuclear mantra, will do little to lessen the threat to the farmlands downstream from INEEL.

But the DOE tends to try to build sound plans on its own faulty assumptions and failures.

The Mixed Waste Plan

The DOE wants to build a plant at INEEL to "treat" nuclear waste contaminated with plutonium and hazardous chemicals and/or heavy metals. In 1997 it awarded a privatized contract to British Nuclear Fuels (BNFL), which is owned by the British government. Anywhere from 65,000 to 185,000 cubic meters of mixed waste might go through the plant. BNFL's intent is that the first 65,000 cubic meters is the TRU waste stored above ground at INEEL. It is not contaminating the aquifer like the buried waste is. It is waste that presents fewer near- or medium-term hazards to Idaho's environment. In fact, 20% of it is already stored in compliance with hazardous waste laws, and INEEL plans to put the rest in compliant storage, even if BNFL's plant is never built.

Some portion of the other 120,000 cubic meters will come from out-of-state; other candidate waste might be INEEL's buried TRU waste if it is ever successfully exhumed.

BNFL hopes to open the plant in 2003 and operate it for 13 to 30 years. In order to treat the first 65,000 cubic meters, the plant will be fed a barrel of waste every half-hour, day and night, until 2015. During that time, BNFL will be fed three-quarters of a billion dollars. The plant might operate for an additional 17 years to treat the extra 120,000 cubic meters, which